

## Murders on the move

AMAIA GABANTXO

Roberto Bolaño

2666

1,127pp. Barcelona: Anagrama, 33euros.  
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The novel *2666* is the Chilean author Roberto Bolaño's *magnum opus*, and an exceptionally exciting literary labyrinth. Bolaño died in July 2003, aged fifty, awaiting a liver transplant that never took place. The book was thus written against time, with no opportunity for revision. What strikes one first about it is the stylistic richness: rich, elegant yet slangy language that is immediately recognizable as Bolaño's own mixture of Chilean, Mexican and European Spanish. Then there is *2666*'s resistance to categorization. At times it is reminiscent of James Ellroy; gritty and scurrilous. At other moments it seems as though the *Alexandria Quartet* had been transposed to Mexico and populated by ragged versions of Durrell's characters. There's also a similarity with W. G. Sebald's work: both Bolaño and Sebald were world-weary, slightly disgruntled, awed by the human capacity for evil and survival; both included ghostly versions of themselves in their books; and both rejected straightforward conceptions of the novel. But Bolaño's passionate sensibility is very different from Sebald's subdued, objective standpoint.

Bolaño's novel is just under 1,200 pages long, takes place in Europe (mostly Germany) and Mexico, and spans almost a century. It is linked to two of Bolaño's previous novels: *Amuleto* (Amulet) and *Los detectives salvajes* (The Savage Detectives). All these works have a certain shape in common. Each explores a polyphonic concept of the novel as simultaneously a philosophical treatise, literary quest, travelogue, detective story, romance and epic. All revolve around an elusive author-figure and a group of literary types who undertake a quixotic search for the author in question. The influences of Borges and Cortázar are evident, for these novels aren't merely about their characters, but about the act of searching; about demented, multifarious lives that collide in the course of a literary pilgrimage. *2666* itself consists of five novels, each of which can be read independently. But only readers who take on all five parts will experience the full scale and range of the work. Each section is open, porous, related to the others and to Bolaño's life and historical circumstances. Each injects new perspectives and layers of irony into the others. Reading them separately would be missing the point.

The plot of *2666* cannot be explained succinctly, for this is not a narrative hatched on plot resolutions or epiphanies. Lives and events evolve concurrently and separately. Everything in the book is related, however tangentially, to the hundreds of murders of women that have taken place in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, since the early 1990s. Bolaño sets these atrocities in the fictional realms of Santa Teresa and the desert of Sonora, but there's no doubting their reference to the actual region of Chihuahua.

Take the following example. The fourth section of *2666* ends with a scene in a hotel room, in which a female politician asks a literary critic



Roberto Bolaño, 2002

to write about the murders because she's powerless to stop them. He decides to do it — someone has to. The narrative leaves them there, but this briefly glimpsed male character raises questions in the reader's mind. Why would a politician ask a literary critic to write about real-life crimes? An internet search on the murders in Ciudad Juárez produced the following: Sergio González Rodríguez, a writer and literary critic, took up investigative journalism and wrote a book about the crimes called *Huecos en el desierto* (Bones in the Desert). In June 1999, two men savagely attacked him in a taxi and warned him against pursuing his investigation. Two months later, he died from the head injuries he received in the attack. Bolaño's work can't be said to be fiction, exactly: the name of the character concerned in *2666* is Sergio González. One wonders when this form of fiction took shape in Bolaño's mind — whether it was already there when he founded the aptly named poetic movement *Infrarealistas* in the 1970s.

Again like Sebald's, Bolaño's writing is deeply political. All the main characters in *2666* are like a galaxy surrounding the black hole created by the murders of Santa Teresa; all move towards this void while struggling against it. There is a little story in the second part of *2666* which illustrates this point. Amalfitano, a Chilean philosophy teacher who has been to Europe, has just arrived in Mexico from Barcelona, and bitterly regrets having accepted a post at Santa Rosa University, because he's frightened his daughter Rosa will be murdered.

In narrative terms, nothing much happens: the philosopher starts to draw incomprehensible diagrams, is visited by a ghost at night, and becomes obsessed by a book by a Galician poet, Dieste (not a collection of his poetry, but a peculiar volume about geometry). Amalfitano can't remember having acquired the book, and can't work out how it ended up on his shelf. This upsets him profoundly. So he hangs it on the clothes-line in the backyard, following Duchamp's instructions for a ready-made work of art: "Hang a geometry treatise from your apartment window, attaching it with a bit of rope, so the wind can glance through the book, dwell on favourite problems, riffle through the pages or tear them up". The book on the line becomes a physical representation of Amalfi-

tano's anguish, and imbues this section with a particularly melancholy atmosphere. Amalfitano is a key character in the novel, whose musings perhaps reveal Bolaño's ambitions for *2666*:

[The pharmacist] chose *The Metamorphosis* instead of *The Trial*, *Bartleby* instead of *Moby Dick*, *Un Coeur simple* instead of *Bouvard et Pécauchet*, and *A Christmas Carol* instead of *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Pickwick Papers*. What a sad paradox, thought Amalfitano. Not even learned pharmacists will take on the great works, the imperfect, the torrential ones that open paths through the unknown. He chose instead the perfect exercises of the great masters. Or what amounts to the same: he chose to watch the great masters in warm-up fencing sessions, but was not interested in the real-life combats where the great masters fight against the Thing, the thing we all fear, the thing that makes us shit ourselves and preen ourselves . . .

There are no defining moments in *2666*. Mysteries are never resolved. Anecdotes are all there is. Freak or banal events happen simultaneously, inform each other and poignantly keep the wheel turning. There is no logical end to a Bolaño book. His novels, short stories and poems work together in perpetual motion, and give proof of a rare and fertile talent. Robert Bolaño's work deserves to be made available in English.

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